What is Proper English?

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the English language and how different cultures bend the standard English language into their own unique way. The argument behind this paper is to see if there is a “proper English” and if there is how do we pick the proper English language between all the different sub languages.

KEYWORDS:

***Ebonics****- American black English regarded as a language in its own right rather than as a dialect of standard English.*

***Code switching****- In linguistics, code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation. Multi-linguals, speakers of more than one language, sometimes use elements of multiple languages when conversing with each other.*

***Spanglish****- a hybrid language combining words and idioms from both Spanish and English, especially Spanish speech that uses many English words and expressions.*

***Standard English-*** *refers to whatever form of the English language is accepted as a national norm in any English-speaking country. It encompasses grammar, vocabulary and spelling.*

What is Proper English?

I chose to write my paper on how we use language to identify self or others because the idea that there is a “proper” English could be true. The way we speak defines us: throughout my life I have realized that depending on the atmosphere or culture you are in, the language you speak may be one dominant language but there are different sublanguages within that dominant language. For example Ebonics “American black English regarded as a language in its own right rather than as a dialect of standard English.” (APA Google def.) As an English speaking person I can understand Ebonics because it is a sublanguage to standard English. Another example could be Spanglish, which is different because it is mixing two different languages (Spanish and English) together to make one combined language. In order to understand this language you have to have a good understanding of both languages rather than just English because people who speak Spanglish mash together words from Spanish and English if they cant remember how to say a certain word in one of the languages. In this paper I will be exploring the different types of languages that root from standard English as well as argue the fact that there might not be an actual proper English because sometimes we can’t choose the language that defines us.

**Code Switching**

“In linguistics, code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation. Multi-linguals, speakers of more than one language, sometimes use elements of multiple languages when conversing with each other.”(wiki) Code switching can also be refereed to by switching dialects, styles or registers such as moving from informal to formal conversations. An example of this comes from personal experience at a career fair, when I first went up to the company I was trying to impress, I went up to the recruiter and pitched myself in a professional way trying to be proper and polite. Once I started talking to the man and getting into conversation we found common interests which led to less formal talk and before I knew it I was on a personal level speaking to this recruiter like it was a buddy of mine. Normally I would try and stay professional the whole time no matter what, but it turned out that he was a family friend of my moms and we ended up talking about how I recently moved and other things not related to a regular recruiting conversation. I actually got offered an internship because of the small connection we had­­ and it goes to show how easily we can code switch unconsciously. “A lot of folks code-switch not just to fit in, but to actively ingratiate themselves to others. We can not tell you how many dozens of stories we got from people who work in service industries who said that a Southern accent is a surefire way to get better tips and more sympathetic customers.” (Thompson, 2013) In a way I used code switching to fit in with this recruiter so it wasn’t the same old boring professional pitch he had been hearing all day and it paid off!

There are numerous amounts of stories that can be told when talking about getting a better tip or price of goods depending on your accent in a certain environment. One story that stood out to me was a story from Patti Hollingshead an American who lived in Ireland years ago and was taken advantage of because of her American accent. She noticed that there were two prices for goods and services. The prices for the others (Americans) were much more expensive but the locals who had accents got a more reasonable price for their goods and services. Patti practiced her Irish accent and finally qualified for the local pricing from the markets she would go to. Obviously she did not have a perfect accent so when the locals asked where she was from she would come up with a random small town in Ireland a couple hundred miles away. One time Patti was talking with a man and he responded in Gaelic, which she did not understand, but she nodded her head while smiling and acted like she knew what he was saying. During this conversation an English-speaking customer came in and the man switched back over to English then whispered to her “We need to be careful here about speaking Irish.” Patti was about to pull out her wallet to pay for the flowers she had picked up and the man would not accept her money because he said it was a pleasure speaking with her. This example shows how people can be judged by the way they speak and it also shows that people can be looked down upon if they are not used to the language barrier.

**Ebonics**

Another form of English frequently switched to is known as Black English or Ebonics and for most English speaking people this form of English is not highly respected. The word Ebonics comes from the two-root words ebony and phonics, which refers to “black sounds”. “The original Ebonics construct was intended to reflect the multinational linguistic results of the African slave trade.”(Baugh, 2005) I think the original definition of Ebonics was going in the right direction but today it is thought of much differently. According to the posts in urban dictionary, modern day Americans are not fond of this language. “A poor excuse for a failure to grasp the basics of English. When in doubt, throw an "izzle" sound in the middle of any word of just string random thoughts together and insinuate that they actually mean something.”(Bling Bling, 2003) Through time the Ebonics language has evolved into the “hood” and “gangster” reputation rather than the origin of slaves. Nearly all the words from Ebonics come from standard English yet English-speaking people can barely understand the language of Ebonics. This language creates a discourse community, which defines where you come from, and those who speak Ebonics are proud of where they come from. This can be compared to someone from the south coming to Michigan and saying y’all rather than conforming to our language and saying you all. When you are in an unfamiliar place you can be identified by the way you speak and possibly create a connection with someone who speaks like you. So if you are in Texas and you have a weird accent compared to the locals who is speaking the correct proper English? The underlying fact of the matter is that there may not be a proper English because the way we speak is not chosen it is given to us where we grow up.

**Spanglish**

Like Ebonics, Spanglish is another language rooted from English that is belittled in our society. Spanglish is most well known in the Mexican society and is a mixture of English and Spanish. In these communities Spanglish is spoken between Americans and Mexicans who have some understanding of each other’s languages but don’t fully understand the other language so basically they meet have way in order to converse with each other. Unfortunately for the Mexicans and Latinos who speak Spanglish and cant completely speak English are looked down upon because people get offended not being able to understand someone in their country. Although Spanglish is not anywhere near the standard English language it still takes a great deal of knowledge in order to understand both languages rather than just knowing one language. Growing up in a Spanish-speaking household it is first nature to speak that language and as most of us know it is hard to learn a new language when you still have to perfect your native language. I went to an elementary school where we had a lot of Mexican families and I remember that they could speak Spanish and English but chose to speak both languages. At the time I didn’t realize why they were speaking that way but now it makes sense because it’s simply easier for them. Just like when I code switch from professional to personal it’s something that happens unconsciously because its just part of human nature to adapt to your environment.

**Proper English**

When I think of proper English the first thing that pops into my head is having dinner with the president and wealthy people surrounding the dinner table. I think this pops into my head because those are usually the most well educated people who have been taught their entire lives to speak properly as well as act properly. There is no real definition of proper English that I could find, the only thing I could find was the definition of the word proper and that consisted of fitting, adapted, conforming, etc. Author Oliver Kamm from The Wall Street Journal states “The grammatical rules invoked by pedants aren’t real rules of grammar at all. They are, at best, just stylistic conventions: An example would be the use of a double negative (*I can’t get no satisfaction*). It makes complete grammatical sense, as an intensifier.”(Kamm, par. 5) The example that he shows us is technically wrong in the english language but it makes sense to nearly everyone who has heard the song, so why is it wrong if it is understandable? All of these things help argue the idea that there might not actually be a proper English because the definition of proper coincides with not being able to choose your language.

**Conclusion**

After exploring the different types of languages that root from standard English as well as argue the fact that there might not be an actual proper English its quite obvious that languages aren’t chosen therefore there cant be a proper English. I do believe that there is standard English, which is the root of all English languages, but there is no evidence supporting one language to be more proper than another. All of these languages within standard English take a great amount of knowledge in order to learn and that’s what makes each language unique.

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